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What the Best Expect

Associations Now Feature
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Learning what the top executives at some very successful associations look for in their team members may just help you find the perfect combination of chemistry, talent, and commitment in your organization.

Summary: Just what is a good hire? How do you know when someone is a "fit"? What qualities should we be looking for in this position? These are the questions every senior manager asks before making a new hire. Now, hear the answers to these questions and others from the top executives at some of the nation's most successful associations.

No leader--no matter how bright, how charismatic, how visionary--can make or break the success of an organization alone. It's no secret that the success of any enterprise depends on the collaborative efforts of team members focused on a common vision and mission.

Business literature is full of case studies, profiles, and prescriptions for how groups can perform more effectively and fluidly. Some offer what they claim to be magic bullets for underperforming teams or untapped talent.

In this din of competing theories, one concept emerges as vital: The tone starts at the top. While it is true that no one leader can make or break an association, it's equally true that staff teams are a reflection of top management's leadership style. With that in mind, let's take a look at what some successful leaders at high-performing associations look for in their team members.

Hire A-Listers

Ask most management consultants or human resource executives how to build a great team, and they'll give you a simple, familiar answer: Hire the best and brightest. It's easy for Procter & Gamble or Amazon to snatch up top talent and pay them what they deserve, but it's often not so easy for nonprofits, especially small-staff organizations or associations with limited financial resources, to do the same.

The leaders interviewed for this article share assumptions about the importance of designing a careful hiring process and sticking to it. That said, and assuming candidates meet the qualifications of the job description, each leader identified unique characteristics as indicators that someone is the right match to complete a team.

"It's harder to put together a team in the nonprofit sector than in the corporate sector," says Red Cavaney, CEO of the American Petroleum Institute, who has done both. "We have more masters, and we work in a more collaborative environment than business, so people have to have more varied skill sets." His prescription, echoed by every leader I talked with, is to hire the best and brightest and pay them accordingly.

Mark Golden, CEO of the National Court Reporters Association, adds that intuition is equally as important as careful analysis. "Make solid decisions based on solid understanding of the skills you need," he says. "Never diminish the nuts and bolts of hiring--but within that framework, pay attention to the hair on the back of your neck."

His intuitive method was reinforced by several of his peers, including Sharon Swan, CEO of the American Society for Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics, who looks for "a fire in the belly about ideas, and a passion for their work."

Equally important is the ability to learn from failure. Suzanne Clark, former executive vice president and chief operating officer of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and now president of the National Journal Group, welcomes candidates who are willing to talk about having made mistakes. "People get an understanding of who they are through their errors, and I'll learn more about someone from how they handled a mistake than I would from their victories." She says she also appreciates candidates who "know what they don't know" and show an active curiosity about the field.

These top executives also demand "soft skills" and flexibility. A sense of humor, accompanied by a keen intellect and emotional intelligence, is a requirement for Sue Meisinger, CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management. Red Cavaney looks for "people who don't take themselves too seriously, people who look at the world in the context of how they can fit in." He also stresses the importance of team members being willing to "sit at the head of the table or at the foot--ready to lead the team or to follow someone else's lead." In other words, successful contributors leave their egos at home, a notion championed by such thought leaders as Jim Collins and Tom Peters.

If we assemble these characteristics into a profile, we have team members who are passionate about their work, seasoned enough to have learned from mistakes (and candid enough to discuss them), eager for new information, ready to laugh, smart, emotionally responsive, interested in being part of a team, and flexible enough to occupy more than one position on the team they join.

Regardless of what our leaders look for in candidates, they rely on a combination of immediate information (resumes, interviews, references), accumulated knowledge (their own experience), and instinct. They are likely to invite input from others during the hiring process, but they trust themselves to make the right choice.

Respect the Culture

In addition to possessing certain personal characteristics, prospective team members need to fit the culture of the team, which will shift whenever someone new joins. That adds adaptability to our list of desirable qualities. The tension between protecting a valued culture and inviting new participants to change it demands great sensitivity from the builders of outstanding teams and careful integration when new team members come on board.

The extraordinary leaders I interviewed regularly spend time talking about the nature of functioning as a team. "I don't think you're ever done," says Sue Meisinger. "There's an ongoing need for the conversation. Anytime someone leaves or joins, it becomes a different team." She regularly takes her group offsite to work on building team capability.

Suzanne Clark cautions that, while we want to hire people we can get along with, the purpose of teams is to focus a group of people with diverse ideas, skills, and backgrounds on advancing shared goals. Mark Golden observes that "by the time people have risen to a certain level, many of them tend to be about the same age. Adding a precociously talented person who's much younger makes for a stronger team." Crossing the major divide of age is a confident gesture on Golden's part; it conveys an outstanding team builder's high level of trust in the talent he chooses.

Assist, Not Impede

Beyond absorbing variations in composition, high-functioning teams have to be prepared to take on new projects and otherwise adapt to inevitable organizational changes. Clear expectations and governing principles create the foundation that anchors the team; adaptability and open dialogue prepare it for agile transitions. The leaders profiled here affirm the importance of voicing their expectations, including how much autonomy teams have and what they are expected to achieve.

Within individual teams, it is up to members to gain an understanding of the unique contributions each participant brings. This may not always be obvious, as some members may need help recognizing what they are best suited to do. A successful team balances its own resources. This takes practice and careful observation.

Critical to team success is a set of protocols for dealing with situations that interrupt progress. Suzanne Clark says, "Teams need a conflict mechanism, a way to work through differences of opinion so that everyone comes out whole in a disagreement." She recommends that leaders model the behavior they want to see in teams--including introducing conflict and demonstrating the ability to receive criticism. To establish norms, the leaders I spoke with all attest to the value of formal orientations to the team process as well as training and professional development that begin as soon as new people are hired.

In addition to clear expectations, behavioral guidelines, and the tangible tools necessary for their jobs, teams invariably require a leader's support and trust to thrive.

Be First Among Equals

Once leaders establish expectations, they make an effort to be team participants, fitting into the fertile mix without dominating the group. They encourage a free and equal exchange of ideas while being relentlessly attentive and thoughtful about how the team is proceeding. Their challenge is to lead by guiding and modeling behavior, to maintain the balance between setting the course and rowing with the crew.

In many of the associations I observed, attracting talent and managing outstanding teams are key factors by which leaders are measured. Performance evaluation and compensation are tied to the success of teams. This serves to institutionalize the importance of teamwork, making it everyone's business, and to integrate an awareness of team behavior into all aspects of the organization's culture.

Fair compensation, professional development, career opportunities, and variety are essential to retaining strong performers. The best leaders pay attention to what is meaningful to each individual on their teams. For some, that may be earnings, while others feel rewarded by opportunities to learn or by the engagement they feel from a broad involvement with the organization's work. Mark Golden says, "I keep exposing them to new challenges and allowing them to pursue areas that capture their interest and imagination. It's important for them to identify what those areas are."

To take advantage of available talent and to keep team members engaged with a broad swath of the organization, several leaders interviewed rotate staff among multiple teams, varying their roles from one team to another. One association invites staff to take on temporary assignments outside their normal range as a way of expanding their skills and opportunities.

Everyone in the group interviewed provides ample professional development opportunities as a way of retaining staff. They see it as an investment, not an expense. Sharon Swan observes, "Learning more expands people's portfolio of resources. It also helps them be less afraid of big changes when they come along."

Red Cavaney says, "If people don't succeed here, I don't want them to be able to say we didn't give them the best tools and give them a chance. I want them to be able to go to the next job and say what a great experience they had here."

Four out of five leaders said they use professional coaches to help their team members function at peak. Some use coaches themselves, and one organization has a coach on retainer, available to anyone on staff.

Control Conflict

Even the strongest teams are precariously delicate: One person out of step with a team can endanger the balance necessary for success. Without exception, the leaders interviewed are immediate, direct, and personal in dealing with team members who perform below standard or show signs of being in over their heads. Each of them says that at the first sign of a problem, they spend one-on-one time with someone who needs attention. They advocate for direct, compassionate explorations of what is happening. They negotiate solutions and make recommendations for improvement.

Sharon Swan doesn't always wait for a warning sign. She recognizes an increasing importance for CEOs to act as coaches to employees, particularly team members with excellent academic credentials but only five to 10 years' work experience. Her concern is that people in this category may believe themselves to be extremely capable and not hint at problems until they are in trouble. Swan behaves proactively, asking questions and making recommendations in the way a coach might.

"You want to believe people can succeed," says Red Cavaney, "so you look for the positive." He, like many others in this group, will offer professional support when an employee needs help, but he says the number of people who can make a significant turnaround is lower than he'd have thought early in his career. Sue Meisinger adds, "You may not be able to change the people, but you can help them become more self-aware, so they can act differently in situations. Sometimes they decide to move on. It's important to let people make that discovery without feeling harshly judged."

Firing someone is a last resort, but it may be the best solution. Throughout my career, I have heard many nonprofit CEOs report having waited too long to take appropriate action with a problem employee. "Our feelings for the individual come into play," says Suzanne Clark, "but we have to take into consideration our obligation to the entire team. Hiring and

firing choices have to be business decisions." Mark Golden, who admits he may give people too many opportunities before he takes action, cautions, "You can do real damage to your team if you hang on too long."

Trust Yourself, Trust Your Team

The characteristics our group of leaders seeks in team members describe well-rounded individuals. The combination of abilities may sound extraordinary, but teams rely on refined forms of behavior that humans are adept at demonstrating--basic skills, highly practiced. The leaders of these teams are exceptionally disciplined, and that discipline becomes part of their staff's DNA. The tone truly does start at the top.

The culture in which a team achieves balance, the values that define its priorities and practices, and the framework that gives it the strength to adapt must come from the organization's leadership. Without those things, the team will lack guidelines for making decisions, and it will stall. Leaders choose their team members and create the context in which the team performs. They teach values. They guide and inspire. They trust the team to create its own outcomes. That element of trust, of letting go, requires confidence in the choices the leader has made.

Teams succeed in part because they focus substantial attention on the dynamics of the group, analyzing their own capabilities, their dialogue, and their performance. Leaders might be said to be inseparable from their teams, so closely are their ideals and beliefs instilled in the body of the team; yet, high-functioning teams are strong enough to adapt to new leaders when the time comes. And effective leaders are strong enough to make significant changes in their teams in response to performance issues or shifts in organizational priorities.

As a nonprofit leader, you have to trust yourself to choose the right people and to model the behavior you want to see. If you are successful, you will earn many opportunities to step back and see just how creative and productive your teammates can be.

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